

Proud Boys | Southern Poverty Law Center

Their disavowals of bigotry are belied by their actions: rank-and-file Proud Boys and leaders regularly spout white nationalist memes and maintain affiliations with known extremists. They are known for anti-Muslim and misogynistic rhetoric. Proud Boys have appeared alongside other hate groups at extremist gatherings like the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville. Indeed, former Proud Boys member Jason Kessler helped to organize the event, which brought together Klansmen, antisemites, Southern racists, and militias. Kessler was only "expelled" from the group after the violence and near-universal condemnation of the Charlottesville rally-goers. Other hardcore members of the so-called "alt-right" have argued that the "western chauvinist" label is just a "PR cuck term" McInnes crafted to gain mainstream acceptance. "Let's not bullshit," Brian Brathovd, aka Caeralus Rex, told his co-hosts on the antisemitic The Daily Shoah — one of the most popular alt-right podcasts. If the Proud Boys "were pressed on the issue, I guarantee you that like 90% of them would tell you something along the lines of 'Hitler was right. Gas the Jews.'"

McInnes himself has ties to the racist right and has contributed to hate sites like VDare.com and American Renaissance, both of which publish the work of white supremacists and so-called "race realists." He even used *Taki's Magazine* — a far-right publication whose contributors include Richard Spencer and Jared Taylor — to announce the founding of the Proud Boys. McInnes plays a duplicitous rhetorical game: rejecting white nationalism and, in particular, the term "alt-right" while espousing some of its central tenets. For example, McInnes has himself said it is fair to call him Islamophobic.

In its own words

"We brought roads and infrastructure to India and they are still using them as toilets. Our criminals built nice roads in Australia but aborigines keep using them as a bed. The next time someone bitches about colonization, the correct response is 'You're welcome.'"

—*Gavin McInnes, "10 Things I like About White Guys," Taki's Magazine, March 2, 2017*

"Well look at the canary in the coal mine called Britain. We see guys get away with raping children regularly, and they have excuses like 'I didn't understand the word 'no.' We have a woman raped several times in one night. All these guys seem to...they don't all get away but they seem to get away way too often. And then you have people being jailed for rude tweets and comments when they're white, so...people in America say 'Muslim are what? One or two percent of the population? There's never gonna be sharia law here.' And I say have a look at Britain. Have a look at Europe. That's where we're headed."

—*Gavin McInnes, "Get Off My Lawn", November 4, 2017*

"Maybe the reason I'm sexist is because women are dumb. No, I'm just kidding, ladies. But you do tend to not thrive in certain areas — like writing."

—Gavin McInnes, The Gavin McInnes Show, June 28, 2017

“I just realized something. Cory Booker is kind of like Sambo. He’s kind of shucking and jiving for the white man. Cory Booker grew up rich in an all-white suburb. He’s basically a white guy. His parents were very wealthy executives at IBM.... But he wants to be a black dude, so he pretends that he’s down with the brothers and he acts outraged about racism all the time — for white people. That gets him votes from whites.”

—Gavin McInnes on his CRTV show “Get Off My Lawn,” January 17, 2018

“The white liberal ethos tells us blacks aren’t at MIT because of racism. They say blacks dominate the prison population for the same reason. They insist America is a racist hellhole where ‘people of color’ have no future. This does way more damage to black youth than the KKK. When you strip people of culpability and tell them the odds are stacked against them, they don’t feel like trying. White liberals make this worse by then using affirmative action to “correct” society’s mistakes. When blacks are forced into schools they aren’t qualified for they have no choice but to drop out. Instead of going back a step to a school they can handle, they tend to give up on higher education entirely. Thanks to the Marxist myth of ubiquitous equality, this ‘mismatch’ leaves blacks less educated than they would have been had they been left to their own devices.”

—Gavin McInnes, “America in 2034,” American Renaissance, June 17, 2014

“I’m not a fan of Islam. I think it’s fair to call me Islamophobic.”

—Gavin McInnes, NBC interview, 2017

“Palestinians are stupid. Muslims are stupid. And the only thing they really respect is violence and being tough.”

—Gavin McInnes, The Gavin McInnes Show, March 8, 2017

“Why don’t we take back Bethlehem? Why don’t we take back Northern Iraq? Why don’t we start our own Crusades? That’s what the Crusades were. They weren’t just someone picking on Muslims for no reason — they were a reaction to Muslim tyranny. We finally fought back.”

—Gavin McInnes, The Gavin McInnes Show, March 8, 2017

“Buying woman parts from a hospital and calling yourself a broad trivializes what it is to be a woman. Womanhood is not on a shelf next to wigs and makeup. Similarly, being a dude is quite involved. Ripping your vaginal canal out of your fly doesn’t mean you are going to start inventing shit and knowing how cement works. Being a man is awesome. So is being a woman. We should revere these creations, not revel in their bastardization.”

—Gavin McInnes, “Transphobia is Perfectly Natural,” Thought Catalog, August 8, 2014

“I am not afraid to speak out about the atrocities that whites and people of European descent face not only here in this country but in Western nations across the world. The war against whites, and Europeans and Western society is very real and it’s time we all started talking about it and stopped worrying about political correctness and optics.”

—Kyle Chapman, who formed the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights, a wing of the

Proud Boys, Unite America First Peace Rally, Sacramento, California, July 8, 2017

“Put something on the table! Give us a reason to accept you, because you know what? Sharia law ain’t it. Raping women ain’t it. Cutting off clits ain’t it. Throwing gay people off roofs ain’t it. You are a disgrace.”

—Pawl Bazile, a production director of Proud Boys’ magazine, on Muslims, March against Sharia rally, New York City, New York, June 10, 2017

Background

Canadian Gavin McInnes has been flaunting his contempt for PC culture for decades. Before entering the fray of right-wing politics, McInnes co-founded *VICE Magazine*, a publication that came to epitomize hipster culture in the late 1990s and 2000s. While the magazine tended to dabble in provocative and taboo topics — generally under a veneer of irony — McInnes took pleasure in stepping over the line. In 2002, for instance, when a *New York Press* reporter asked McInnes what he thought about his neighbors in New York’s Williamsburg neighborhood, he responded, “Well, at least they’re not niggers or Puerto Ricans. At least they’re white.”

While presenting his observation as a joke and revenue-generating ruse (“incendiary political statements garnered endless publicity for us,” he told Gawker), McInnes seems to have meant its underlying sentiment sincerely. “I love being white and I think it’s something to be very proud of,” he told *The New York Times* a year later, revealing an ideology that would later form the foundation of the Proud Boys. “I don’t want our culture diluted. We need to close the borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, white, English-speaking way of life.” McInnes also started writing for VDare.com, a white nationalist hate site. In one 2005 article, he railed against Canadian multiculturalism and lamented that Jared Taylor, the editor of the race-science newsletter American Renaissance, had not been invited to speak at the University of Ottawa. Ten years later, McInnes would welcome Taylor onto his own show, where the white nationalist spent more than an hour explaining why he believes white people are “better” than African Americans.

McInnes left VICE in 2008, citing creative differences, and pursued a variety of other media projects. But his relationship with mainstream outlets started to erode in 2014 as he began to swap irony for earnestness. As part of an American Renaissance series featuring “race-realist commentators on the future of American race relations,” McInnes offered his predictions alongside fellow contributors like John Derbyshire, Paul Gottfried, Richard Spencer and Jared Taylor. In his piece, McInnes wrote that while he didn’t harbor any hate for minorities, he did for white liberals who subscribed to a “Marxist myth of ubiquitous equality” and refused to acknowledge innate disparities between people of different races — a notion he supported using the long-discredited work of Charles Murray. McInnes insisted he held out hope for the future of American race relations: once “we’re all forced to live side by side, we’ll quickly realize we’re incompatible, and agree to disagree,” he concluded. “The blind utopians at *The New York Times* will be crushed and the rest of us realists will be dancing in the streets.”

Only months later, McInnes published an article titled “Transphobia is perfectly natural” that prompted his then-employer, the ad agency Rooster, to indefinitely

sever ties with him. “We’re all transphobic,” he wrote in the Thought Catalog piece. “We see there are no old trannies. They die of drug overdoses and suicide way before they’re 40 and nobody notices because nobody knows them. They are mentally ill gays who need help, and that doesn’t include being maimed by physicians.” McInnes has also referred to transgender people as “gender niggers” and “stupid lunatics.” McInnes’ repugnant rhetoric extends to women, too. He’s written that “through trial and error, I learned that women want to be downright abused” by men, and, in a tweet, that “Every guy I’ve ever known to be involved in a ‘domestic’ was the result of some cunt trying to ruin his life.”

With former business partners turning him away, in the spring of 2015 McInnes formed a partnership with the Canadian far-right video channel Rebel Media and, a couple months later, launched “The Gavin McInnes Show” with Compound Media. On both platforms, he regularly chatted with right-wing guests (his first show featured the far-right provocateur and former Breitbart reporter Milo Yiannopoulos) and carved out an ideological space for frustrated young men to rally around: western culture is superior to all others, racism is a myth created by guilty white liberals, Islam is a culture of violence, and feminism “is about de-masculinizing men,” he told his audience. A group of like-minded men at Compound Media — who bonded over their shared frustration with PC culture — began to meet in New York City dive bars. From these gatherings, the Proud Boys were born, and McInnes officially introduced the group in *Taki’s* in September 2016.

There are three degrees of membership within the Proud Boys, and to become a first degree in the “pro-West fraternal organization” a prospective member simply has to declare “I am a western chauvinist, and I refuse to apologize for creating the modern world.” To enter the second degree, a Proud Boy has to endure a beating until they can yell out the names of five breakfast cereals (in order to demonstrate “adrenaline control”) and give up masturbation because, in theory, it will leave them more inclined to go out and meet women. Those who enter the third degree have demonstrated their commitment by getting a Proud Boys tattoo. Any man — no matter his race or sexual-orientation — can join the fraternal organization as long as they “recognize that white men are not the problem.” Women have their own contingent called the Proud Boys’ Girls.

Members are identifiable by more than ink: they sport yellow-trimmed black Fred Perry polos and yell the tongue-in-cheek catchphrase “Uhuru!” — a Swahili word they picked up from a YouTube video in which an activist talks to white people about reparations. Their name comes from an *Aladdin* song, “Proud of Your Boy.” They adhere to a list of libertarian-leaning principles, including opposition to the drug war, racial guilt, and political correctness, and support for small government, closed borders, and “Venerating the Housewife.”

The oddball humor that tinges Proud Boys culture, and creates a set of references incomprehensible to those on the outside, has attracted a surprisingly large number of men. There is an obvious overlap between their views and those of President Donald Trump, whose election in 2016 played a clear role in increasing Proud Boys’ membership. A red MAGA hat is nearly as prominent at Proud Boys gatherings as their Fred Perry polos, and, in fact, one of their first public outings was at a pro-Trump art show — called #DaddyWillSaveUS — where McInnes displayed photos of

himself as a white slave. It's a favorite mythical reference of his as well as neo-Nazis and white nationalists; one episode of his Rebel Media show centered on the notion that the "history of slavery is rife with white slaves."

The Proud Boys took off after the presidential election. Each of their official Facebook and Twitter pages had over 20,000 followers at the end of 2017. The website Rewire estimates there are roughly 6,000 members. Group meetings, according to McInnes, "usually consist of drinking, fighting, and reading aloud from Pat Buchanan's *Death of the West*."

For McInnes and the Proud Boys, much like Buchanan, pro-Westernism is indistinguishable from outright opposition to Islam. McInnes's Rebel Media videos feature titles like "Donald Trump's Muslim ban is exactly what we need right now," "10 examples of the Koran being violent," and "Islam isn't 'dope.' It's sexist." He's also hosted Pamela Geller, among the most prominent figures in today's anti-Muslim movement, on his newest show on the conservative online outlet CRTV, "Get Off My Lawn." "People in America say 'Muslims are what? One or two percent of the population? There's never gonna be sharia law here,'" he said during the interview before assuring viewers that Britain, where Muslims are "raping children regularly" and where "women are raped several times in one night," is the "canary in the coalmine." In an interview with NBC, McInnes admitted "I'm not a fan of Islam. I think it's fair to call me Islamophobic."

The Proud Boys' pro-western posture allows them to position themselves— somewhat counterintuitively — as a tolerant and progressive social force. If Islamic backwardness, as they imagine, threatens gay people and women, then they serve as their guardians by protecting and promoting "western values." Their opposition to Muslims and Islam, improbably, stands as a marker of their own tolerance. In that way, their ideology is similar to many European far-right groups — like the French National Front and Danish Party for Freedom — who push hardline anti-immigration policies at the same time they call for greater tolerance in the form of secularism and gender equality, all the while attempting to distance themselves from overt racists. According to the sociologist Rogers Brubaker, the concurrent embrace of intolerance and inclusion is not only a rhetorical strategy but a political one, employed to "reach out to new constituencies and gain mainstream acceptance" from people who might otherwise hold an aversion toward extremist groups.

Proud Boys do their best to muddy right-wing taxonomies. Despite the pains they've taken to distance themselves from open white nationalists and antisemites, Proud Boys have been present at high-profile alt-right events, including the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. "[J]ust don't fucking wear your Fred Perry, or decide to belt: 'Proud of Your Boy,'" McInnes limply warned followers before the event. "[I]f you decide to rub elbows with those people [while] in colors, you very well could find yourself disavowed."

But they did show up, which McInnes evidently expected. In the first episode of his Compound Media show after the August rally, McInnes said he had been "just combing through all the media reports going, 'Don't say Proud Boys, don't say Proud Boys, don't say Proud Boys,'" hoping the "lunatic Nazi" who allegedly killed Heather Heyer wasn't a member of his group. He wasn't, but the white nationalist Jason

Kessler — who has been filmed undergoing his second-degree Proud Boy initiation — was the rally’s principal organizer. Less than two months earlier, Kessler had been a guest on “The Gavin McInnes Show,” where he promoted Unite the Right and, in a chummy interview, laid out the ideological overlap he and McInnes shared. “What’s really under attack is if you say, ‘I want to stand up for white people. I want to stand up for western civilization. I want to stand up for men. I want to stand up for Christians,’” to which McInnes nodded in agreement and added other examples: “I’m against immigration...I’m against jihadis. I’m against radical Islam.”

After Charlottesville, in a move to protect the fratty and innocuous Proud Boys’ brand he’s worked so hard to cultivate, McInnes ejected Kessler from the organization and insisted he had never *really* been a Proud Boy. “I’m suspicious of you, coming to Proud Boys meetings saying you’re not alt-right...and I think you were there to try to recruit guys,” McInnes told Kessler when they spoke on his show two days after the rally. It was only after the violence in Charlottesville, when any doubts about the true nature of the movement were stripped away, that McInnes attempted to earnestly distance the Proud Boys from the alt-right label. Before that, he seemed content to let the Proud Boys brand appear more ideologically ambiguous, profiting off the alt-right’s rising popularity until things got ugly.

Although McInnes has attempted to distance his organization from the violence of Charlottesville, violence is firmly entrenched in Proud Boy dogma. McInnes was filmed punching a counter-protestor outside of the Deploraball in January 2017, and after a speaking engagement at New York University the next month turned violent, he wryly declared, “I cannot recommend violence enough. It’s a really effective way to solve problems.” In fact, in early 2017, the Proud Boys added another degree to their membership hierarchy: in order to enter the 4th degree, a member needs to “get involved in a major fight for the cause.” “You get beat up, kick the crap out of an antifa,” McInnes explained to Metro. Though he claimed in the interview he was ready to “get violent and beat the f--k out of everybody,” he later backtracked in a Proud Boys Magazine piece, assuring the public the fraternal group was opposed to “senseless violence.” “We don’t start fights, we finish them,” McInnes wrote.

Around the same time, Proud Boys member Kyle Chapman announced he was forming a new “tactical defense arm” of the Proud Boys — with McInnes’ “full approval” — called the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights (FOAK). The paramilitary wing positions itself as a defensive organization formed to protect right-wing activists at political demonstrations. Chapman, who has an extensive criminal history, first gained renown within the alt-right when he was photographed hitting a counter-protestor over the head with a stick at a March 4, 2017, pro-Trump rally in Berkeley, California.

Now referring to himself as “Based Stick Man,” Chapman has been making the rounds of far-right rallies around the country, doing little to create rhetorical distance between the Proud Boys and outright white nationalism. “I am not afraid to speak out about the atrocities that whites and people of European descent face not only here in this country,” he told a crowd at the July Unite America First Peace Rally in Sacramento, “but in Western nations across the world. The war against whites and Europeans and Western society is very real.” It’s an idea he brings up over and over again. “Whites are being discriminated against en masse,” he told a reporter at The

Atlantic. On social media, he's used the tags #ItsOkayToBeWhite and #WhiteGenocide — both of which originated in white nationalist web forums.

Chapman openly encourages fellow Proud Boys and others on the far right to "sacrifice" for their beliefs. "You are also gonna have to come to the realization that you may have to bleed to keep this going," he told the crowd in Sacramento. "You're maybe gonna have to do some time in jail and you very may well have to die...I'm willing to die. Are you guys willing to die?" he asked, and was met with cheers.

Similar calls have come from Augustus Invictus — born Austin Gillespie — a former Florida attorney and Senate candidate Chapman named his second-in-command in FOAK. Invictus' ideology is a bizarre mix: he holds many mainstream libertarian beliefs but also claims Nazi and antisemitic thinkers (from the likes of Carl Schmitt and Francis Parker Yockey) as his chief intellectual influences and paganism as his faith. During his Senate run in 2016, journalists discovered that the candidate had slaughtered a goat and drank its blood as part of a pagan ritual. In campaign material, he criticized the federal government for abandoning eugenics programs. He's also an admitted Holocaust denier.

McInnes welcomed Invictus onto his show on July 28, 2017, where the conversation repeatedly dipped into Invictus's interest in armed revolution. He explained that he'd fallen out with his fellow attorneys because they took offense to his suggestions that "maybe lawyers should be hanged in a revolution and...if people get in our way, shoot them." With regard to journalists, he continued, "I'll tell them, 'you're the first ones that are gonna be hanging from a lamppost in the event of revolution.'" McInnes only nodded along and, in response, offered up his own frustrations with liberal journalists.

Like some former members of the Proud Boys, Invictus eventually left the group for more hard-core parts of the white nationalist movement. Two months after the interview, Invictus severed his ties with FOAK and, by implication, the Proud Boys, explaining in a Facebook video that he was frustrated with Chapman's lack of professionalism. He has since focused on strengthening his relationship with the alt-right, becoming a board member for Kyle Bristow's white nationalist legal outfit, Foundation for the Marketplace of Ideas.

The turn toward violence — and the blurring borders between 'alt-lite' and 'alt-right' — is typified by Brien James, the state representative for the Indiana Proud Boys and a member of FOAK. James gained his racist skinhead credentials in the Outlaw Hammerskins and the Hoosier State Skinheads before becoming one of the founding members of the Vinlanders Social Club (VSC), a racist gang known for its extreme violence. Since its creation in 2003, the VSC has been linked to at least nine murders nationwide. James once bragged that his Joint Terrorism Task Force file was "a mile long," and allegedly nearly beat a man to death for refusing to Seig Heil at a party.

James no longer considers himself a white nationalist but does identify as a member of the alt-right. In June 2017, he posted a video on YouTube in which he painstakingly attempted to categorize the groups that fit under the alt-right's umbrella, drawing distinctions between white nationalists and what he calls "constitutional nationalist organizations" that put "America first" and are ostensibly

racially inclusive. He explains that the Proud Boys and American Guard — an organization James founded as a modern version of the nineteenth-century anti-nativist group the Bowery Boys — fall into the latter category. But American Guard appears to draw a large portion of his membership from the racist skinhead VSC. And, even though James has stated that he refuses to mingle with National Socialists, he marched alongside them in Charlottesville. A video captured by Charlottesville Weekly shows James in an American Guard t-shirt trudging behind a man yelling “Black lives don’t matter” and “Hitler did nothing wrong” at the August rally.

Proud Boys have become a staple at anti-Muslim and other far-right demonstrations, like when a group of Halifax Proud Boys disrupted a July 2017 ceremony held to mourn the murders of indigenous people by declaring the land “a British colony” and singing “God Save the Queen.” Both rank-and-file and FOAK members were in attendance at the anti-Muslim hate group ACT for America’s “March Against Sharia” rallies held in 28 cities around the country on June 10, 2017. At the New York City event — where Chapman harassed counter-protesters — local Proud Boy Pawl Bazile gave a speech contrasting his own Italian forebears with Muslim immigrants. “Give us a reason to accept you,” he yelled, “because you know what? Sharia law ain’t it. Raping women ain’t it. Cutting off clits ain’t it. Throwing gay people off roofs ain’t it. You are a disgrace.” He also referred to Burkas as a “ghost costume.”

Only weeks after the rally, the New York chapter gathered for an event they called “Islamberg Exposed: Ride for Homeland Security.” The Proud Boys, along with radical anti-government groups including the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, caravanned through the small, upstate New York African-American Muslim community of Islamberg, which they described as a “suspected ground for recruiting, housing, and training terrorists, as well as a place away from the public eye for stockpiling weapons.” In a film Bazile made of the “ride through,” one of the participants claimed to have conducted “night-vision reconnaissance” in the town, and allegedly witnessed “training” like “breaking-neck-practicing” and “hand-to-hand combat training.” Participants featured in the film, including Lisa Joseph from ACT for America, referred to the community as a “no-go zone”: fictitious Muslim neighborhoods that are so dangerous even the police refuse to enter. Unsurprisingly, the outing turned up nothing to suggest anything nefarious happening in the community.

While it’s hard to imagine anyone but a racist would spend their weekend menacingly parading through a Muslim neighborhood, Proud Boys continue to forswear that label. A number of journalists who’ve written about the group have received cease-and-desist orders from Proud Boys’ lawyer Jason Van Dyke insisting they “do not now, nor have they ever, espoused white nationalist, white supremacist, anti-Semitic, or alt-right views.”

The statement is especially remarkable coming from Van Dyke, a member of the Dallas-Fort Worth chapter and known neo-Confederate. Van Dyke’s affair with far right extremism stretches back until at least his college days, when Michigan State University police searching his dorm found extremist literature, including *The Turner Diaries* and *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In 2000, the university suspended Van Dyke for several semesters after he was arrested for domestic violence, possession of a banned weapon and firearm safety violations.

Van Dyke's penchant for violence appears on his Twitter page, where in 2014 he made death threats against another user. Alongside a picture of a noose, he wrote, "Look good and hard at this picture you fucking nigger. It's where I am going to put your neck." "Your kiddies are quite a nuisance," he wrote to another, "My advice: run and hide. If I find you, I WILL kill both you and your family." After the musician Talib Kweli drew attention to the tweets, Van Dyke tweeted a picture of an AR-15 with the caption, "Stupid Talib is trying to get a lynch mob on IG to attack my home, job, & family. It won't end well for the attackers." Twitter banned him in response.